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HEADLINE: Why UM backed ACC expansion

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COLLEGE PARK - Now that the Atlantic Coast Conference expansion discussion has achieved a hiatus, I would like to describe my thinking during these complex and significant discussions. Much of the speculation on presidential motives presented in the media did not represent my thinking or that of my ACC colleagues.

The most important overarching question is this: "Is a nine-team ACC viable for the future, or should the ACC morph to a 12-team conference?"

I believe the answer is that both are viable, though each would lead to a different level of competitive play for the ACC.

As I see the steadily evolving national picture in collegiate athletics, if we were to stay as a nine-team ACC (which could easily drop to eight or even fewer teams), the ACC would remain a regional conference centered in North Carolina that would move steadily to the edges of the mainstream of national collegiate athletic competition by the growth of national conferences around us.

For many people, that might not be a bad result. It depends on your view about where collegiate sport fits into the university.

The major affairs of the NCAA - bowl game invitations, locations and championships; TV and media access; tournament selections; and other "national issues" - will be driven by the growing national conferences that are seen to be national leaders of collegiate sports.

The national conferences will push the "regional conferences" to the edges of the mainstream, both directly and indirectly. Direct pressure will come from the "seats at the table," invitations to tournament play, Bowl Championship Series access and other explicit favoritism given the national conferences.

Indirect pressure, while subtle, will be no less significant in determining the level of competition derived. Top coaches, blue-chip players and others striving to be in the middle of the action will lean (if not run) to the national conferences. The regional conferences, even those with the history and culture we may all revere, will have less access to the best players and coaches, will have diminished influence in national affairs, will stay regional and over a relatively short period of time will even lose their ability to become national. Their fan bases will have to accept this status, and the programs will have to adjust to the reduced support that results from this evolution.

The Ivy League is a fine example of a successful regional conference. Its fringe position in national athletics was consciously created.

The regionalization I described would come by evolution of a national picture around ACC inaction. In my view, the athletic history, culture and fan base at the University of Maryland call for competition in a national conference. We see ourselves as national leaders and competitors in athletics as well as in academics and the arts. For that reason, I supported the move to a 12-team national conference.

The old adage that "you should never watch sausage or law being made" applies to athletic conferences, too. The process of inviting one team is complex because the nine ACC presidents and the invited team president who make these decisions do not represent themselves, vote as they please or even have the opportunity to maintain a consistent position because of the various, and often intense, inputs they receive.

Information from campus constituents, fan bases, state and federal courts, governors and attorneys general, media and others energize each other and can overtake presidential decisions. Couple that with the super-majority of presidential votes required to extend an invitation to join the ACC and the desire to bring in three universities simultaneously, and we found that we could not "get there from here" in one step. Bringing in one university is hard enough, but three at once? With multiple invitations, both the number of considerations and the difficulties (such as revenue sharing, schedules, traditional rivalries, and so on) literally explode.

So were we stay at nine and let evolution take its course on the ACC, or move to a sub-optimal 11, adding the University of Miami and Virginia Tech, and leave one shorter step for a move to 12? That was my ultimate question as the expansion discussions played out. I decided that taking in two first-class universities in a major step to a national conference was right for Maryland.

To have not taken this step would likely have terminated the opportunity for the ACC to become a national conference for the foreseeable future.

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